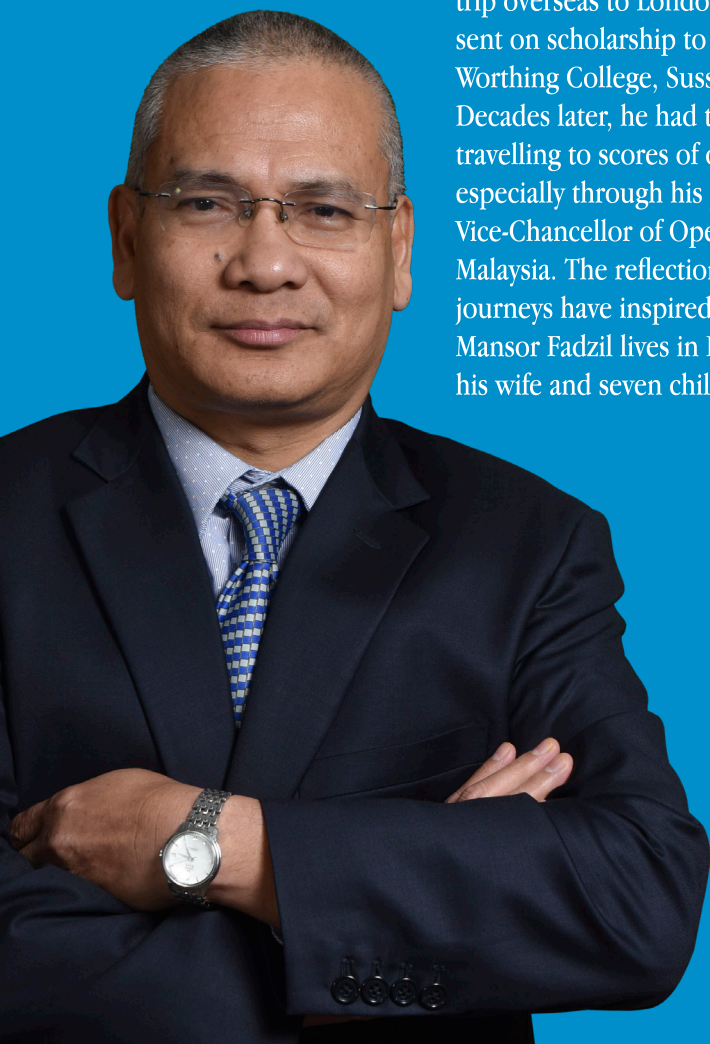




My Story to Tell
MANSOR FADZIL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mansor Fadzil was born on 1 October 1957 in Singapore. When he was just a year old, his parents moved to Langkawi, Kedah, and this is where he grew up. In 1977, he made his very first trip overseas to London, where he was sent on scholarship to obtain his A-level at Worthing College, Sussex. Decades later, he had the fortune of travelling to scores of other locations, especially through his job as the President/Vice-Chancellor of Open University Malaysia. The reflections from these journeys have inspired this book. Mansor Fadzil lives in Klang, Selangor, with his wife and seven children.

INTRODUCTION

People travel for many reasons. Some travel for adventure or to explore new places, cultures, languages and to make new friends.

There are also people like me who travel because of work. I had the opportunity to travel extensively when I joined the newly established outfit, METEOR Group in 1999. Under the Group's initiative, it established Open University Malaysia (OUM) in 2000 where I became one of the pioneer staff and was appointed Vice President responsible for academic matters.

My travels were mostly work-related and occasionally, holiday trips with the family. These trips made me realise that every place is unique, from its people to the building architecture to its cultures. Many consider travelling as a therapy for the mind and soul as it allows them to get out of their comfort zone and do something that they love.

For me, it is a learning curve – there is always something to learn from

the places that I have been to. People that I met during my travel, places that I visited, the cultural diversity, all these make me see life in a different way.

The travel experience of every individual is never the same. My experience may be different from those who travel for adventure or leisure. But then, we all have our own stories to tell. They can either be good or bad but all these add up to one's life experiences.

One of the issues of travelling is the waiting before boarding a flight. At times, there are bound to be mishaps or incidences that can make one's travelling experience exasperating. It is not uncommon for frequent travellers to encounter problems like lost baggage, delayed flights, losing a connecting flight or even getting the flight date mixed up.

Nowadays, travelling has become more affordable due to cheaper airfares compared to the old days when only the privileged got to fly. In my case, my first air travel happened right after the Malaysia Certificate of Education (MCE) examinations, when I was offered to do my A-level in the United Kingdom (UK).

Having travelled to more than 30 countries over the past two decades, the observations and experiences that I have been through have helped me implement new initiatives for the institution that I work for.

Even Islam encourages people to travel as it opens our minds to see things in different perspectives. The word *saiyr*, which means "travel" or "move", appears a total of 27 times in the holy Quran.

For Muslims, travelling is encouraged for knowledge seeking, to explore new horizons and learn new things, for trade and business, to learn from historical events or simply, for fun and recreation.

This book is merely to share some of my observations of places I have been to and the people that I have met.

UNITED KINGDOM



September 1977, LONDON

The arrival hall at Heathrow Airport was packed with people as I collected my bag from the baggage carousel.

It was early autumn and I was struggling to keep warm. Had I known, I would have worn warm clothing. There were seven of us. We came from different parts of Malaysia and were on Government scholarship to pursue our A-level studies in England. All of the others had chosen civil engineering, except me. I chose mechanical engineering instead.

This was also my first time travelling abroad. I had dreamed of this moment since my chance meeting with a school mate at Kolej Sultan Abdul Hamid in Alor Setar, Kedah, while in Form Four.

He was in Form Six and was preparing to further his undergraduate studies in nuclear engineering in the United States (US). That chance meeting was life-changing. He talked about his impending journey, and how hard he studied to excel in the examination to finally get a place in a university in the US.

It sounded so exciting. Studying abroad meant seeing the world, experiencing different cultures, meeting new friends and experiencing different education styles and environment. I felt invigorated. For a moment, it gave me a purpose in life.

My meeting with the Sixth Form senior was brief, probably 15 minutes but the impact was long-lasting. The conversation we had was an eye-opener. It struck me that what's important then was the opportunity to study abroad and see the world. It didn't matter whether it was in the US or UK. That newfound sense of purpose changed me. I became more focused and studying became my number one priority. I had always been good at Mathematics and hoped that would be my ticket to study abroad.

Back then, overseas studies meant studying popular programmes like engineering, law, medicine or accountancy.

I was ecstatic when the MCE examination results came out. I excelled in all my favourite subjects - Mathematics, Additional Mathematics and Physics. Getting a Government scholarship to study abroad seemed more achievable. When the offer finally came in, I applied to do mechanical engineering, the only field that I thought would be suitable for a person who loved Mathematics.

Students in my generation literally had no exposure or guidance on study opportunities and career prospects, unlike present-day students. Many did not have an inkling what they wanted to be after finishing school. In the end, many started working after completing their Fifth Form.

A call from an official from the Malaysian Student Department asking us to get ready broke my reverie. "Collect your bags and get onto the bus," hollered the official.

As the bus cruised into the city, I could not help noticing that England was so much different to Malaysia. The weather was different, the buildings were different and even the vegetation was different. For an 18-year-old travelling abroad for the first time and adapting to a new place without familiar faces around, it felt daunting somehow. But I was determined that whatever the circumstances were, I would give my all to ensure that I completed my studies and make my family proud.

The bus took us from Heathrow to Bryanston Square where Malaysia Hall was located. I could not help thinking this was the place that has served princes and prime ministers as well as Malaysian luminaries and ordinary people. This place has witnessed the birth of many diverse student-led organisations, including the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Kesatuan Melayu United Kingdom.

My mind wondered as I recalled the experience of flying for the first time. Never having flown in an airplane before, I was naturally nervous and excited at the same time. The Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) was not around yet at the time; all flights took off from the old Subang Airport terminal.

I still remember the flight. It was a Boeing 747 with a scheduled stopover in Belgrade, Serbia. What I thought would be a pleasant journey turned out to be nerve-wrecking due to rough weather and turbulence. The most horrifying part was when the plane suddenly dropped. It was like a roller-coaster drop and I felt as if my heart skipped a beat. It must have been during the night as the sky was pitch-black as I peered through the airplane window. The turbulence lasted for quite a while but we finally landed safely in Heathrow.

Upon arriving at Bryanston Square, a Malaysian Hall officer ushered us into the lobby. We finally gathered our belongings and were given keys to our rooms. After dinner, we were told that the briefing of our respective colleges would take place the next morning. Tired after the long flight journey, I went straight to bed.

It was almost noon when I woke up the next morning. I was in a daze and wondered where everyone was. I quickly washed myself and got ready for the briefing.

“Where is everyone?” was my first reaction when I entered the hall. I was late and the briefing was over. I was told by the officer at the counter to find my own way to Worthing College, where I was registered to do my foundation studies. The bus taking us to the college had left, leaving me behind. What a way to start the day!

In addition to my batch of seven students, there were others who were enrolled in different colleges and universities in England. Not a single

one of them were in sight. Clueless, I asked the officer how to get to my college.

It turned out that Worthing College, Sussex, was about 100km from the city. The journey would normally take one and a half hours by train.

I ruled out the possibility of taking a taxi as it would cost me a bomb.

Riding a bus would be too cumbersome.

I waved down a taxi and asked to be dropped at the south-bound train station that would take me to Worthing.

Worthing was a typical seaside town, very laidback and everything seemed to move in slow motion. My accommodation was located a few kilometres away from the station. Stoke Court, which would be my residence over the next two years, was a hub for Malaysian students studying there.

I got to rent the place with the help of a senior student. It was about 30 minutes' walk to the college. Worthing College is a co-educational college and it does not provide hostels for students. With the exception of a handful of foreigners like me, most of the students were locals.

Settling down at a new place, with a new culture and new neighbourhood was quite a challenge for me. Fortunately, I came from a village in Langkawi where life moved slowly, somewhat similar to Worthing.

Langkawi was a quiet backwater back then where the primary economic activities were mainly fishing and agriculture. The villagers planted paddy as their main source of income while those living near the sea were mostly fishermen.

Life was simple and there was hardly any distraction. Our village was a close-knit community where everyone knew each other by name. When I received the offer to study abroad, I became the talk of the village. Very few of the village children went to university, much less studied abroad. In fact, I was the only one in my family who got to go to university.

Worthing was very much like Langkawi, idyllic and slow-moving. This coastal village did not have much to offer except for a theatre and there wasn't really any big mall for people to go to. Instead, the Brits spent their happy hours in the bar, drinking beer and catching up on what's happening in town.

The inclement weather, with an average temperature of 10°C, was a challenge for me to adapt to initially. Accustomed to Malaysia's hot and humid weather, Worthing was the exact opposite. The constant cold, even in summer when the temperature rose to about 18°C, required a great deal of acclimatising to.

After class, my housemates and I would normally spend our time indoors. The television was our only form of entertainment. We watched sitcoms, soap operas, and over the weekends, football and cricket matches. Most of the time, I would spend my time catching up on my studies, doing revisions and reading. I read all types of books but my main interest was those related to cars and aeroplanes. Occasionally, we went out bowling or golfing in town just for the fun of it.

Money was tight and with the monthly stipend of £70 that we received, it was important to make sure that it lasted until the next "pay day". To save money, it only made sense that we cooked instead of eating out. The only problem was none of us knew how to cook.

As adventurous teenagers, we were keen to try out our culinary skills. There was no recipe book to refer to and with zero cooking skills, coming up with edible dishes became more of an experiment. Someone suggested that we cooked curry as the ingredients were readily available at the nearby grocery shop.

Most of the stock including halal meat and chicken came from the Asian

grocery retailers in Brighton. The grocery shop at our place only sold them on specific days of the week. Ironically, fish was expensive although Worthing used to be a fishing village.

After our first successful attempt at cooking curry, it became our staple dish over the next two years. One day, it was chicken curry, the next day, meat curry. Our usual lunch or dinner consisted of rice, curry and vegetables. Nothing more.

Worthing introduced me to fish and chips. I got my first bite after a few months in Worthing using the spare money that I had. It felt liberating, especially after months of eating curry.

Food always reminded me of mom's cooking back home. Once, we tried cooking sweet mung bean porridge (*bubur kacang hijau*), a traditional Malaysian dessert of mung beans, coconut milk and palm sugar. It was a disaster as the porridge turned out hard instead of the soft, sweet porridge that mom used to make.

Our mistake was not soaking the beans before cooking. We poured everything into the pot and put them to boil. Well, the porridge eventually ended in the trash bin instead of the dining table.

As youngsters, we considered these as minor setbacks. In a way, these challenges made us more independent and creative. Living together with friends from different backgrounds and upbringing made me understand the meaning of patience, tolerance and brotherhood.

There was this housemate of mine from Perlis who had problems waking up in the morning. We normally walked together to college, which took about 30 minutes from our rented home.

He often got reprimanded for being late to class. He knew that if he didn't do anything, it would affect his grades. So, he came up with an ingenious plan.

He would wear the clothes that he would be wearing to class the next day to bed. Well, it saved him time. When he woke up the next morning, he would drink his glass of milk and head straight to class. People say necessity is the mother of invention. My friend was a living proof of this. During summer, we would take a stroll to the promenade along the seafront, watching people fishing or swimming.

The gentle sloping beach at Worthing is sand and shingle with most of the sandy parts covered by the tide. The pebbled beach made walking inconvenient as the tiny gravel pieces tended to get into our shoes. The best time to go was during low tide when the seawater subsided, leaving the sandy beach exposed. Parents would take their children for a swim, sailing or fishing, particularly in summer when the weather was much warmer.

Dominating the seascape was Worthing Pier where local residents went to get their cup of tea or watch movies. There was also an amusement arcade within its compound.

A short walking distance from the promenade was Worthing town centre. It was the heart of the town where most of the leisurely activities took place. The local building architecture was plain, with none of the exuberance of contemporary Brighton, located about 20km away.

There weren't many exciting activities for youngsters as Worthing is known to be a pensioners' town. The wealthy and city dwellers who wanted to get away from the hustle of city living moved to this township for a more slow-paced and idyllic life.

Elderly couples walking their dogs or just strolling down the promenade was a common sight. This place was not for those with a penchant for night life as most shops were closed well before dusk except for the bars and pubs.

My two years in Worthing provided tremendous opportunity for me to explore my potential. During my first year in college, I decided to work part-time at a battery factory located not far away from where I was staying. The work was mundane but the pay was good. I received a weekly salary of £100 or £400 a month, a lot more than the £70 monthly stipend that I received.

I worked there for three months and saved enough money to buy a moped or battery-powered bike. It made travelling easier and saved me time getting to class.

It was during our second year at Worthing that my friends decided that we should travel to Europe during the semester break. Fired up and excited, we meticulously drew up our travel plans. The planning only covered places to visit as we were travelling on a shoestring budget. Forget about staying in fancy hotels or renting a car to get around.

Most of the time, we bunked in youth hostels or bed and breakfast establishments. In places where we couldn't find a place that suited our budget, we would take the night train to the next city. In Paris, we slept in the park near Eiffel Tower and camped at the beach while touring Italy. The experience was uplifting: it made me believe that I could achieve anything if I put my heart into it.

The final year at Worthing was a defining moment for me as my future depended on how well I fared in the A-level examination. The hard work that I put in was not in vain. My results turned out to be pretty good and I excelled in all my favourite subjects. That helped boost my chance to secure a place in university to read engineering as my grades met the necessary entry requirements.

The only problem was choosing the right university for my undergraduate

studies. It was mindboggling as I didn't really know which university offered the best engineering programme. Getting information was difficult because there was no Internet; communication was through snail mail. The quickest way to get information was to personally visit the prospective university. I visited several universities including Leeds University and Birmingham University. Unsure which was the better university between the two, I decided to choose Birmingham simply because I was taken in by the beautiful brick-coloured façade and architecture of the building. Thus began the next phase of my journey, spending three years in Birmingham and finally proceeding to pursue my Master's and PhD at Sheffield University. In total, I spent nine fulfilling years in England before coming back to Malaysia to begin my career as a lecturer with the University of Malaya (UM).



France

July 2015, INSEAD, FONTAINEBLEAU

It took the taxi slightly over an hour to reach Fontainebleau from Orly Airport. Located southeast of Paris, this quaint town is known for its opulent Fontainebleau Palace, built by the French royalty way back in the 1100s.

I wasn't here on vacation although I had purposely chosen Fontainebleau over Singapore and Abu Dhabi for my four-week learning stint.

Fontainebleau is the original campus of INSEAD (European Institute for Business Administration), equivalent in stature to Harvard Business School in the US.

After registering at the reception counter, I was given an identification card that provided access to various facilities within campus like the cafeteria, library and gymnasium.

The campus buildings are pretty modern with a floor-to-ceiling glass and aluminium structure. The upper and lower galleries of the main building serve as the passageway that connects the adjoining buildings where other facilities like classrooms, breakout rooms, library, café, bookstore and fitness centre are located.

Nestled in the vast and sprawling forest of Fontainebleau, the campus is spread across eight hectares, a quiet oasis amidst the lush greenery.

The Advanced Management Programme (AMP) that I was attending is an intensive four-week programme designed for top senior executives of organisations including CEOs, COOs, CFOs and C-suite executives. With over 30 years' experience as an academic, the first half with UM and the accompanying 14 years with OUM, I believed it was crucial that I also honed my skills as a leader.

Acceptance into the programme is not automatic and subject to a review

by the admissions committee. The selection was rigorous and candidates needed to submit recommendations from three referees who could vouch for the suitability and commitment of the candidate to the programme. When the offer finally came through, I had to initially decline as the given date clashed with my work schedule. I had to reschedule the training to July, which happened to coincide with the fasting month that year. This meant that I had to spend the final two weeks of fasting in Fontainebleau and Hari Raya in the absence of my family, relatives and friends. Celebrating Hari Raya without your loved ones is a small price to pay for the wisdom and knowledge that I was about to gain from the programme.

As the idiom goes, no pain no gain. Nothing comes on a silver platter, unless you are royalty or born rich. All my life, I have had to work hard to achieve my goals. This was no different.

The diversity of students caught my attention during the first day of class. It felt like the world has converged on Fontainebleau. Asians, Caucasians and Africans sat side by side, and listening to them speak in many different languages was simply refreshing. We had students from all over the world except the UK, which I thought was odd considering that UK is just next door.

I once read in Quora about how the French perceive its neighbours. The Brits are viewed as small-minded, uncultured and badly dressed, who spend most of their time gardening, playing cricket or drinking beer in pubs. They regard the Spaniards as proud and noisy and they are not fond of the Germans either, but acknowledge German's industrial supremacy. The Swiss are the object of merciless satire in French television advertisements while the Belgians are considered as universally dull and

lacking “finesse”. These observations were from a guy who lives in France, and he believes these are the sentiments of the masses. But he ended his opinion with a disclaimer, “You can believe it or not, but don’t kill the messenger.” I found it funny but what he said was probably true.

The French are very proud of their country and language, and as foreigners, you are expected to speak their language. But INSEAD was just the opposite, the student composition was very diverse, and I admire how well the admissions team had crafted our community. By bringing together people of varied cultures and ideas to the programme, it provided a global perspective to every aspect of the teaching and learning. We were given an iPad each before the start of class with our names engraved on it. It was our lifeline, without it we would be lost. All the essential tools for our training like daily timetable, course materials, instructions and manuals were stored in there.

Classes were between 8am and 5pm with hourly breaks of 10 minutes for each session. To show how serious they were about keeping to the time, a clock was specifically placed at the back of the classroom as a reminder. Everything was arranged to go like clockwork, everything pre-planned to the minute.

The teaching was a combination of lectures and assignments. Case studies, management games and small-group discussions were an essential part of the learning process because they encouraged healthy debates and the sharing of experiences and ideas.

Participants were divided into smaller groups before the start of the programme. My group included an Australian, Swedish and Norwegian. Within the group, we discussed our assignments, brainstormed for solutions and participated in management games.

The assignments were designed to heighten our sense of judgement and encourage participants to think out of the box. One assignment required us to shoot a video of things and places in Paris, which ended with a dinner cruise along the Seine River.

Another required us to interpret a modern painting based on our perception. One professor even asked the class what we hoped to achieve in the next 40 years. Logically, what more could a 50-something dream of over the next four decades? A 10-year goal would be more achievable. To grow old gracefully perhaps, only if I get to live to a hundred!

Personally, it was a great learning experience. Mixing with people of diverse cultures taught us the virtues of tolerance, patience, empathy and the ability to listen actively and accept our differences. It built our confidence to speak up and have our opinions heard. It could be challenging at times to find a consensus on certain issues in our discussions, but on the other hand, I was impressed with the group's talents and admirable traits.

Fontainebleau gave me the courage to stand up and be my own person. Capable, visionary, bold and inspiring – those are the qualities of great leaders which INSEAD aspires to produce. It is up to the individual to rise to the challenge.

The INSEAD experience was invaluable as it provided a global perspective of how the present-day business functions. The rapidly changing world requires leaders with foresight and sound judgement because traditional business models don't always work.

One intriguing aspect about INSEAD is that it has an institute that teaches everything you need to know about the Blue Ocean Strategy. Two of its professors, W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, wrote the best-selling

book, which has sold over three million copies and published in 46 languages.

The strategies outlined in the book are applicable to most industries as they propagate value innovation to create powerful leaps in value for both businesses and buyers, thus making the competition irrelevant. Instead of engaging in head-to-head competition for market share, the book contends that lasting success comes not from battling competitors but from creating “blue oceans” by tapping on new markets to achieve strong growth.

The stint at INSEAD coincided with my 14th year at OUM, which first opened its doors to learners in 2001. As one of the pioneering staff, I have seen the institution grow under the stewardship of its founder, the late Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad and later, Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Anuwar Ali.

Tan Sri Abdullah was instrumental in laying the foundation of the university while Tan Sri Anuwar helped grow the institution into a leading open and distance learning (ODL) institution, creating our own blue ocean through an innovative approach in programme delivery and learner support.

Getting to where we are today involved a great deal of hard work but moving forward would be even harder. Other institutions are looking at OUM as a successful model in ODL and many are jumping onto the bandwagon to get a piece of the pie. The blue ocean is slowly turning into a red ocean. It's a challenging feat for OUM to remain sustainable but differentiating ourselves from the rest of the pack is where our future lies. As the French proverb says, Rome wasn't built in a day. It takes time and effort to build a great institution. To grow the business, OUM needs to

focus on laying the bricks consistently because that was how the Romans built their empire.

The bricks symbolise the system and core values of the organisation. There are bound to be issues and setbacks along the way but through continuous improvement of the systems and adherence to the set values, success is possible with the right strategies.

An unforgettable incident during my stint was when one of the members of the OUM Board of Directors, Tan Sri Ir Dr Ahmad Zaidee Laidin, texted me to say that he and his wife would be coming to visit me at Fontainebleau. He happened to be in Paris on a trip and suggested that we meet up. I arranged for a taxi to pick the couple up in Paris and drive them to Fontainebleau. I was glad that they came, things were getting a bit mundane. We chatted and I later took them for a meal in town. After saying goodbye, I got them a taxi for the ride back to Paris. It was nice to meet up with familiar faces in an unlikely place like Fontainebleau.

A memorable part of my INSEAD training was the convocation ceremony. It was held in a chateau in town where we received our certificates. The ceremony seemed pale in comparison to the chateau's architectural grandeur and historical significance. It was brief and simple and at the end of it, we had our dinner before bidding goodbye to fellow participants. My foundation studies in Worthing and training stint in INSEAD have been among the defining episodes of my life.

Attending the AMP in Fontainebleau is a major milestone in my career. It could not have happened at a better time because the following year, I was made the third President/Vice-Chancellor of OUM following the retirement of my predecessor, Tan Sri Anuwar.

My involvement with OUM began in 1999 when I was roped in by the late

founder Tan Sri Abdullah to help set up the university. After getting the blessings of the Government, METEOR Distance Learning was established in 2000 as a subsidiary of METEOR, the holding company representing the consortium of the 11 public Malaysian universities.

OUM was registered in 2000 as a private university, enrolling its first batch of over 700 learners in August the same year. What makes the University different is that it functions as a private entity but is owned by the public universities.

We started off with a skeletal staff during the initial stage. Those were difficult days as we had very little experience delivering programmes through the ODL mode. We worked hard, putting in long hours to ensure that the programmes run smoothly.

Our mandate was clear: to complement the role of existing universities by widening access to higher education to the masses, particularly working adults. At the same time, we were also expected to play the strategic role of helping Malaysians gain expertise in ODL.

india



Setting up a university from scratch was challenging. There were teething problems but more important was to ensure that the business model was functional and sustainable.

Thus, travelling became part and parcel of the job because being a new player in the field, we needed to learn about the best practices adopted by other open universities worldwide. It's unnecessary to reinvent the wheel, what was important was to avoid the common mistakes and put our own spin on a well-tested idea.

As part of the fact-finding mission, I had the opportunity to visit the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India in 2001. I was then the Vice President (Academic) and what interested me about IGNOU was its focus on learner support. There was a special unit dedicated to address issues, problems and concerns of learners and if necessary, help them out with the necessary guidance and counselling.

It was an excellent mechanism to deal with learners' concerns and grouses which we eventually implemented at OUM. That was how the Learner Service Centre came into being. As a learner-centric university, we want our learners to come back to us if they need guidance and help.

Much as we were happy with this new development, as a first-time visitor I found India perplexing. I could not help noticing the alarming disparities across the population. Most apparent was the living standards between the wealthy and the poor. The super-rich live in lofty and palatial homes while the poor have to make do in shanties, struggling to cope with daily living. It is probably here that you get to see the extremes co-existing in "harmony".

The Indira Gandhi International Airport, 16km away from town, provided me with a glimpse of India. I was taken in by how modern the airport was,

comparable to that of KLIA. As we entered the city, New Delhi impressed us with its modern buildings and infrastructure. The initial impression began to wear off as we got closer to the old street.

Tent homes and hovels lined the street choked with cars, rickshaws, tuk-tuks, cows and pedestrians, spewing up dirt, noise and utter chaos. This is the part of the city where ordinary people and tourists come to experience India in an authentic way, a life very much detached from the glitz and modernity of the other part of the city.

Indeed, India remains an enigma to the outside world. A country that is recognised as a leading nuclear power, having produced missiles and satellites, and yet millions of its people do not have access to electricity. Daily power cuts are normal, even in the nation's capital.

On a particular business meeting in Delhi with Tan Sri Abdullah, the host checked us into a two-star hotel. From the time we got our room keys, things began to go haywire. We had to walk up the stairs as the lift was not working. Upon reaching my room, I had problems with the room key, the lights were mostly not working, and neither was the television.

Frustrated, we decided to cancel the rooms the following day and went over to the Oberoi, an upmarket hotel. We asked the reception whether there were rooms available but was told there were none.

Unperturbed, Tan Sri Abdullah told the reception that he had stayed at the Oberoi before. The response was immediate. "Yes sir, we do have rooms available." It sounded like music to my ears! After the rather unpleasant encounter at the previous hotel, what we needed was a comfortable bed to sleep on. We finally got into our hotel rooms, which was without question one of the best that I have been to. Well folks, at the Oberoi, money talks!

If the reception was a let-down, the hotel facilities were remarkable. There was a waiter assigned to each floor serving the guests round the clock.

The breakfast spread was simply amazing, it was fit for a king.

Having travelled to India many times since then, I had the opportunity to see different parts of the country. Each place is unique in its own way.

Going to Bangalore is like stepping into another country. Spectacular skyscrapers, modern roads, upmarket establishments and world-class facilities with people driving flashy cars that make you feel as if you are in a fantasy world.

Kochi in Kerala is more serene and organised, without the overwhelming chaos which is typical of many of the larger, modern cities in India. I have been there several times to visit the partner institutions of the Institute of Professional Development, OUM's sister company. The state's literacy rate is almost 100%, an incredible achievement considering that in some parts of India, illiteracy is a huge problem. It is also very much cleaner than the other places that I have been to, although good hygiene and sanitation practices seem to be woefully lacking in many parts of the country.

If you happen to walk along the city streets in Delhi, for instance, my advice is to watch your steps. They are littered with cow dung and even human faeces. Sanitation and hygiene do not seem to be high on the priority list. Public urinals are a "no-no", never use them unless you can stand the sight and smell. Disregard of public hygiene has people saying that peeing in public is not against the law, it is against the wall. It is common for them to do their "business" against the wall. Enough said.

If you head north to Varanasi, a different scenario awaits. Located in Uttar Pradesh, it is regarded the spiritual capital of India. It is also a pilgrimage destination for the Hindus who come here to bathe in the Ganges in

order to wash away their sins and perform funeral rites. It was in Varanasi that I met with the 14th Dalai Lama while attending an international seminar in conjunction with the 92nd Annual Meet of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) in 2018.

Dalai Lama is the name given to the supreme religious and political head of Tibet. He and thousands of his followers are currently living in exile in Dharamsala, a hillside city in Himachal Pradesh, a state in north India. A recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama has been calling on the international community to embrace compassion and love in resolving conflicts.

When he assumed political power of Tibet and became the Dalai Lama at the age of 15, he strived to make Tibet an independent and autonomous state of China. It did not materialise and he was forced to flee the country following the incursion of China.

He came across as a highly personable individual, drawing people to him like a magnet. His address at the Meet reflected his personality – it was filled with compassion, empathy and love. He stressed that war would not bring any good to the world and we can only find lasting peace through dialogues instead of force.

He once said, “My generation belongs to the 20th century, a century of violence. Two hundred million people were killed. Even though we have wars now, we mustn’t lose the confidence and courage that peace is achievable.” There’s a Tibetan saying: “Fail nine times; make nine times the effort.” Listening to his words make me think that all is not lost, there is still hope for the future.

A trip to India would not be complete without seeing one its most iconic buildings. The Taj Mahal, which I visited in 2012, remains India’s most

famous monument. It was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a symbol of his undying love for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Tourists from near and far make it a point to visit Agra to witness this architectural wonder, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983.

The Taj Mahal stands on the bank of Yamuna River, which serves as a moat to defend the Red Fort of Agra, until the Mughal empire moved their capital from Agra to Delhi in 1637. Its construction took over 20 years to complete, involving 20,000 workers and a fleet of 1,000 elephants. These elephants were used to transport building materials that were sourced from all over India and Central Asia to the site.

What's amazing about the Taj is that it changes colour at different hours of the day and during different seasons. It is pink in the morning, milky white in the evening and golden in the night when the moon shines. Its workmanship is so exquisite that the Taj has been described as "having been designed by giants and finished by jewellers."

If the Taj is known for its beauty and splendour, the Tirupathy Balaji Temple in Trichy is said to be one of the holiest shrines in India. With daily visitors numbering between 50,000 and 100,000 and rising to over half a million people during festivals, the temple is ranked as one of the richest in the country. It has an asset of over 4.5 tonnes of gold mostly in the form of ornaments and jewellery donated by its devotees. But temple insiders claimed that the amount could just be a partial estimate of the temple's total wealth.

Located on top of a hill, it is the dream of every Hindu devotee to perform a pilgrimage to the shrine at least once in their lifetime. Curious, I decided to visit this particular temple on one of my working trips. As expected, the place was packed with people by the time I reached there. It was a steep walk up the hill. To be exact, it takes 3,550 steps to reach

the top. Looking at the steep incline, I climbed as far as I could and came down.

There are many temples in India, some are there for the most bizarre of reasons. In Hyderabad, the Visa Temple is where the devotees come to offer their prayers so that their visas get approved. So, if you are thinking of flying high, make sure you know where to bow!

If you are crazy over Amitabh Bachchan, the god of Indian cinema, go over to the Amitabh Temple in Kolkata. Fans and devotees offer special prayers to Amitabh because to them, he is god.

The Bharat Mata Temple in Varanasi is unique as it does not have a deity. Instead, the shrine consists of a map of India, constructed from marble. Inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi in 1936, it pays homage to the freedom fighters who gave their lives for the independence of India.

There are thousands of Gods that Indians worship. It's unbelievable but then, faith knows no boundaries. As a popular phrase goes, "It happens only in India".

My travels in India taught me a thing or two about life in this country. Over here, cows are revered while the Ganges is regarded as the holiest of rivers by the Hindus. The country has millions of stray cows as many states prohibit their slaughter.

Due to religious reasons, cows are bred only for their milk but once they are no longer productive, they are let loose. The cattle are free to roam the streets and scavenge cultivation areas, often causing substantial damage to crops.

Cow shelters built by the authorities are overflowing and volunteers are struggling to keep the cattle healthy and fed. It's a complicated issue but then, India is known to be a complicated country. It has strange ways of handling things.

With a population of over one billion, about 30% of its citizens earn less than US\$1.90 per day. This makes India the number one country in the world with the largest number of people living below the international poverty line. But India also has many billionaires among its population. Forbes' top 20 billionaires list for 2019 includes an Indian business magnate who has a net worth of US\$50 billion.

Such alarming disparity exists across the population not only in terms of wealth but also education, healthcare and access to clean water and electricity. This tells a sorry tale of India's lopsided economic growth. It's a hand-to-mouth existence for the majority of Indians and sadly, there is nothing much they can do about it. The poor and illiterate will continue living a life of bondage, with no opportunity for social mobility. For them, life is a struggle and poverty is becoming a way of life.

It requires herculean measures to overcome the social and economic problems facing the country. It is beyond the comprehension of normal people like us. But looking at the bright side, India is steeped in history and culture. The food is great and I must say that India has the best *chai* tea. That's enough to keep me coming back!

Seeing India makes me appreciate the little things that many of us take for granted. As a Malaysian, I feel blessed and grateful for what I have.



JAPAN

I have read and heard a lot about Japan even before setting foot on the Land of the Rising Sun. The first thing that comes to mind about the country is the beautiful cherry blossoms that many would spend time and money just to view them up close.

I was among the guilty ones because in spring 2019, I took the whole family for a trip to Osaka to view the cherry blossoms besides the usual scenic tours around the city.

This wasn't my first trip to Japan as I have visited other cities like Tokyo, Yokohama and Kyoto. What strikes me is that Japan comes across as a modern state with a highly developed economy. But nothing beats the experience of being there in person. The country's capital, Tokyo, is everything that I imagined and more. One of the more recent times that I visited Tokyo was in 2016, when I attended the Asia Regional MOOC Stakeholders Summit at Meiji University.

Like many others who have been to Japan, we can agree that the country is definitely very clean. The streets, parks, public places – they are spotless. The habit of keeping clean is well-ingrained in the psyche of the Japanese. Students are taught to clean their own desk before class begins, sweep the floor and even wipe the window panes. People don't litter. If they happen to be eating out, they would normally dispose of the food package at the place where they eat. Or else, they bag their rubbish and throw them at home instead of the side walk. No one leaves their rubbish behind.

If only we can emulate them. For many of us, throwing rubbish is just a simple act of putting it in the rubbish bin for the garbage truck to collect. Not in Japan. It is a tedious and time-consuming process. Everyone is into recycling and all trash is sorted before being thrown away. Plastic, glass, paper and kitchen waste are placed into different garbage bags before

disposal. Well, you may think this is the normal recycling process that some of us are doing, only that the Japanese are more thorough. We normally just sort our thrash and place them in the black garbage bag but over here, there is a specific garbage bag for each type of trash and the bags come in different colours and sizes. That's how meticulous the Japanese are.

They are also very punctual. Public transport is so efficient that you don't need to worry about being late for your appointment. Almost everybody takes the public train or bus as they are highly reliable. You may be staying a hundred or more kilometres away from your work place but you don't need to worry about being late because they are always on time, right to the last minute.

People over here prefer taking the train, particularly those in the cities, but in the suburbs where public transport is infrequent, they rely more on cars to get around. It is inexpensive to buy cars but owning one can be quite a burden. Besides the usual automobile tax and insurance, car owners also have to fork out money for compulsory inspection and car maintenance which can be costly.

Not only that, a person buying a car must show proof of a valid parking lot. If the buyer has a parking lot at home, then it is fine. Otherwise, the buyer needs to rent one but the parking space must be within a 2km radius from where he stays. I don't think this kind of rule would work anywhere else because who would want to park their cars somewhere else and walk 2km to get home. We also tend to worry over the safety of our car and the possibility of it being stolen. But then, the crime rate in Japan is very low. You may have accidentally left your wallet at the train station, but worry not, most of the time you will find it at the very same spot that you left it.

The public transport system is so efficient and punctual that it makes sense for most Japanese to take the bus or train for their daily commuting. Driving can be cumbersome because the speed limit on highways is 100km/hour but cars entering the city limits cannot go beyond 40km/hour. It is probably faster to cycle than to drive!

In fact, cycling is another popular means of getting around in Japan. One thing that you need to be aware of is that bicycles have to be registered. For new bicycles, the salesperson will help with the registration. The new bicycle will be pasted with a yellow sticker to show that it has been registered. For second-hand bicycles, the process is not straightforward as it involves other processes like the transfer of ownership.

Although registration is not compulsory, you may be accused of stealing if you fail to produce documentation in the event of a random check by the police.

There are many things about Japan that may surprise first-time travellers to the country. I notice that the Japanese seem to have an affinity for vending machines. They are everywhere. Every residential and commercial block and every corner has one or more of these machines, even in the dark alleys. You can buy anything and everything from bottled drinks to fresh eggs to flowers and hair bands. Craving for burgers or fresh crepes? No problem. Not properly attired for a business meeting and need a necktie? Get one from the vending machine. These machines are a lifesaver.

The tenacity and innovative spirit of the Japanese are traits that I really admire about them. Habitable land is limited here as the country is mountainous and prone to earthquakes. Over the years, earthquakes have claimed thousands of lives, not counting the damage on property and

infrastructure. The Japanese Government has invested a lot to minimise future damages and to ensure its people are safe. Houses are built using materials that can withstand tremors and children are taught from young of what to do when an earthquake happens. Offices and schools conduct regular earthquake drills so that everyone is well-prepared.

Even bullet trains are equipped with earthquake sensors that would immediately freeze a speeding train well before the big earthquake happens. This allows passengers time to evacuate and seek shelter.

Not only that, all smartphones in Japan are pre-installed with earthquake and tsunami emergency alert systems to warn users against impending disasters. The ability of the Japanese to innovate and learn from past events has made the country one of the most earthquake-ready nations in the world.

The attention to detail places the Japanese a step ahead in many areas. They see problems as opportunities for innovation. To overcome the lack of parking space, they came up with car elevators so that vehicles can be parked below and above ground. Public toilets have heated seats and even music if you feel shy about your bowel movements.

It is common for those working for large corporations or businessmen to attend out-of-town meetings where they normally stay overnight in the host town. This gave rise to capsule hotels. Traditionally meant for men on business, these hotels are becoming increasingly popular among tourists for their affordability and convenience. They are essentially small cubicle spaces for those willing to spend the night, minus the luxury of hotel rooms.

Japan is an expensive place to be and for budget travellers, the capsules may be a good option if you are not claustrophobic. The sleeping pods

are the size of a single-bed with lights and shelf for your electronics. If you are game for a night in a cubicle, try the capsule.

This country of over 126 million people consists of over 6,800 islands. But 97% of the population lives in the four largest islands – Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku and Kyushu. The ability of Japan to rise from the ashes of war and its rapid modernisation makes it one of post-World War II's greatest success stories. Somehow, its stunning economic achievements in the 1980s took a hit following the economic crisis and ballooning public debt. The rise of China has thwarted Japan economic dominance as the former now reigns supreme as an economic force to be reckoned with in the region.

Japan's aging population is also impacting its economic survival as a third of its population is 60 years and above. The mortality rate is higher than the birth rate and by 2050, it is projected that the population will decline to under 100 million. When the population shrinks, growth will slow down, companies will cut back on their investments, people will spend less and save more to protect themselves against an uncertain future. All these will impact the economy and create a downward spiral.

The impact of an ageing population in Japan is visible by the number of elderly people still working. Difficulty in getting younger employees have resulted in many companies re-employing retired staff, albeit on a part-time basis. As it is, businesses are already employing robots to do specific jobs. The manufacturing sector is relying more on robots to overcome their dependence on human labour. Robots are also being used as support for the elderly with mobility functions. It is anticipated that in the near future, more elderly people will use robots with artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities as live-in support to assist in their daily work.

An aerial photograph of a coastal town in South Korea, likely Seogwipo. The foreground features a wide, wooden staircase with railings, where several people are walking. The town is built on a peninsula, surrounded by turquoise water and a dark, rocky coastline. In the background, there are mountains and a large body of water. The text "SOUTH KOREA" is overlaid in white, stylized letters on the left side of the image.

SOUTH KOREA

Talking of South Korea, I can't help comparing it to Japan. Not in terms of physical infrastructure but more of the social norms that people from these two countries share.

Koreans bow as a form of greeting; the same way the Japanese do. They are generally hardworking, not only when it comes to work but also studies. The competition to get into the top schools and universities is so intense that students spend longer hours studying and very little time on anything else.

In terms of economic and social progress, they seem to be on par but Japan is a cut above as it is considered Asia's most developed country. Korea comes a close second. Although Koreans tend to be deeply offended if outsiders attributed its success in some ways to Japanese influence, there is no denying the link between the two.

Korea and Japan have fought battles for centuries and the former was considered a part of Japan until 1945. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, Korea was divided into two occupation zones. The initial plan of a unified state never materialised. Instead, the ensuing Korean War has split the country into two – North and South Korea.

South Korea embraced a liberal democracy after the War. Initially, an agriculture-based economy in the 1960's, its shift to an export-oriented economy was a critical factor for its success. Its focus on technology development and innovation underpin the country's export competitiveness and remarkable economic growth over the past decades. If you get to travel to South Korea, you will notice that the Koreans are very much into technology. Smartphones are not only for communication but for many other things. They use smartphones to pay for goods at the mall, subscribe to real-time television channels and scan QR codes.

It is interesting to see Koreans doing their shopping at the virtual stores. Instead of shopping in real stores, commuters using the Seoul subway station will stop to do their shopping at the station ever since the first virtual store opened in the country.

The pillars and platform screen doors at the subway station are plastered with images of life-sized store shelves filled with goods, ranging from food, electronics and toiletries. All shoppers need to do is to browse the virtual shelves, snap the barcodes of the items they wish to buy, and enter the barcodes using the store's app. The goods will be at their doorsteps by the time they reach home. How convenient!

For tech geeks, head over to Seoul's downtown shopping district. Here, you can get the latest gadgets you can possibly imagine. Where else in the world can you find a more wired culture than Korea? From its super-fast Internet speed, innovative smart cities and tech leading companies, it is without a doubt one of the techiest destinations in the world.

The fascination towards everything Korean seems to have caught up with the world. The K-factor is becoming a global phenomenon. These include K-pop, K-drama and K-beauty products. The K-pop culture has even gone beyond music where fashion trends with K-pop influence are becoming a craze among youngsters.

Koreans are so obsessed about physical beauty that they have no qualms parting large sums of money on cosmetics and beauty products. Plastic surgery is common among the younger generation, with one in three women having gone for plastic surgery at some point in their lives. The most common cosmetic procedures are nose jobs and double-eyelid surgeries.

It is not surprising that South Korea is dubbed the plastic surgery capital

of the world with its “plastic surgery medical tours” attracting people from neighbouring countries and afar.

If you need to get away from the modernity of city life, head to Jeju Island. It lies in the Korea Straits at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. Just an hour’s flight from Seoul, the island is a stark contrast from the city. It has a laidback atmosphere and is ideal for those looking for a quiet retreat.

This island is unique as 95% of the land and rock formations are from volcanic lava. The landscape is a combination of lush greenery, volcanic mountains and beautiful beaches, which are great attractions among tourists. It is not surprising that Jeju Island was gazetted a World Natural Heritage Site by UNESCO.

I sort of like the slow-paced atmosphere of Jeju. The island lacks the verve of a modern city but this does not make it less attractive. If you are into beaches, mountains, waterfalls and museums, Jeju has plenty to offer. The many facets of South Korea make it an interesting place to visit and explore.

It is also fascinating to see how Korea has evolved from an agriculture-based economy into an economic giant in the new millennium. This has a lot to do with its focus on technology development and innovation. Ironically, it also shares similar challenges to what Japan is facing in terms of geography, limited natural resources and an aging population.



My fellow Malaysian students and I (fourth from the left) on our first overseas trip to London, the UK, in 1977.



Outside the classroom at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France.



My group mates in the Advanced Management Programme at INSEAD comprised an Australian, Swedish and Norwegian.



Taking in the sights during my time off in Fontainebleau.





I was part of a delegation with my former boss, Tan Sri Anuwar, and several other colleagues on a working visit to Shanghai, China, many years ago.





In Shanghai, we managed to squeeze in some time to take in the local scenery.





My OUM colleagues and I got to visit the famous Taj Mahal in Agra, India, in 2012.



On a trip to Varanasi, India, in 2018, I had the rare privilege of coming face-to-face with the 14th Dalai Lama (centre, in red).



Enjoying the sea breeze in Malé, Maldives. Many of its island resorts provide accommodation in the form of gorgeous water bungalows.





The wonderful scenes I managed to catch on the Hop-On Hop-Off bus tour in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2019.





I took my whole family (including my little grandson) on a trip to Osaka to see one of Japan's most famous sights: the blooming sakura trees.





On our days off in Ho Chi Minh City, my OUM colleagues and I took some time to drink in the sights of this southern Vietnamese city.





Our visit to Ho Chi Minh City often involves meetings and convocation ceremonies at our partner institution, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology.





The OUM team with our counterparts from four other ASEAN open universities at a regional meet in Pattaya, Thailand in 2018.

CHINA



When I visited Beijing many years ago, I wasn't expecting much. Back then, news about air pollution enveloping the big cities were rife. It was no exaggeration – I noticed people wearing masks and the sun's ray was just a scattered glow.

The city skyline was hardly visible during the day but I admire the tenacity of the Chinese. At the crack of dawn, the streets were already teeming with people. The Chinese are not only hardworking; they are also very enterprising. This probably stems from the country's historical background.

Prior to the economic reforms in 1978, the majority of the population were farmers. They worked in collective or state farms that were managed by the state. Similarly, most of the industries were state-owned, and this has prevented China from developing its full potential.

With the opening up of the country to foreign investment and by encouraging entrepreneurship among its people, China experienced an unprecedented economic growth. Rural farmers came to the cities in droves, taking up jobs that the free enterprise had created. Many became entrepreneurs themselves.

The country's enormous population remains its strongest asset, providing the workforce to power its manufacturing industry. "Made in China" products are a symbol of its manufacturing feat, serving both local and international consumption. Beijing and Shanghai are among the country's trading hubs with each having its own speciality. Beijing is known for its pearls while Shanghai, its silk carpets. Foreign businesses are taking advantage of the cheap labour to produce their own goods and labels. In a way, this helps invigorate the economy, creating much-needed jobs, raising living standards and giving the people the chance to live their

dreams. In short, it has lifted millions of Chinese out of poverty. For a country that has adopted a closed economy for so long, the economic reform seems to be a Godsend. The rise of the middle-income class opened up opportunities for more Chinese to attain higher education from renowned overseas institutions, seek better medical care and spend on luxury goods and travel.

Beijing is like any other modern city with skyscrapers dotting its landscape. Its tallest building, China Zun at 1,732 feet, is even taller than our Petronas Twin Towers. Life seems good to the Chinese. But like any other country, economic disparity still exists. The very rich get to live in “green” enclaves. With environmental problems plaguing the country, the privilege of living in a place where you get to breathe clean air, drink clean water and experience the peace and tranquillity of green spaces comes with a high price tag.

Despite drawing flak for its environmental conditions, China has moved ahead to become the world’s biggest manufacturer of solar panels, wind turbines and electric cars, which the Government is aggressively promoting in the hope of cleaning its smog-choked cities. It is also seen as a means to reduce its carbon footprint as China’s greenhouse gas emissions are among the highest in the world.

The vast country offers diverse sights and cultures if you care to explore. The Great Wall of China is a must-see destination as it symbolises China’s engineering genius and cultural greatness.

The Great Wall reminds me of the Pyramids of Egypt. I often wonder how the people of yore were able to construct such structures that have stood the test of time. It must have been a herculean feat to erect a mammoth structure of such scale under trying conditions.

The Forbidden City is another destination that should not be missed. It once served as the imperial palace for emperors and their households for over 500 years. This palace complex also houses the Palace Museum and was only opened to the public in 1925.



Maldives & Mauritius

These two islands in the Indian Ocean are noted more for their gorgeous resorts, pristine palm fringed beaches and beautiful warm turquoise water, the perfect getaway for those who love the sun and sea.

I have been to both and one distinct difference between these two countries is that Mauritius has a more forgiving climate with temperatures ranging from 16 - 29°C, while Maldives is much hotter with average temperatures of between 25°C and 32°C.

Both are known more as holiday destinations, particularly to those who love water sports like scuba diving, snorkelling and swimming. These two countries are literally sitting in the middle of the ocean with Maldives located nearer to the equator while Mauritius is much further down.

Maldives is made up of about 1,200 coral islands and they are just about two metres above sea level. A tsunami that ravaged the islands in 2004 swallowed two-thirds of the country, causing 20 islands to be permanently erased from the map. Due to its low elevation, it is projected that Maldives will most likely disappear under the ocean in 30 years.

With a population of slightly over 360,000, a quarter of the people live in Malé, the capital city, while the rest occupies the smaller atolls. Tourism is the country's major economic activity while the tuna industry contributes to a small percentage to the economy. What's interesting is that 80 of the islands are major tourist attractions. Due to the small size of these islands, each atoll hosts a single resort, thus providing tourists privacy and exclusivity. Each island resort may be geographically isolated but WiFi connection is good.

But things are not cheap in Maldives as it does not have that many natural resources other than tuna. It imports more than it exports, thus the exorbitant prices of most goods. Having been to Malé on working trips

several times, it was a real surprise when in 2018 we got to use the newly opened Sinamalé Bridge from the airport to the capital city. The airport sits on a small piece of island and airport passengers normally take the speedboat or ferry to get to Malé. With the new bridge, they can now use taxis to transfer to the city. That's impressive for a small country like Maldives.

The geography makes it difficult to develop a sustainable transport infrastructure but this is what makes the country unique. Most of the islands are too small to build roads, so boats and ferries are the main modes of transport. Maldives is an incredibly beautiful country and it will be a shame if it becomes another Atlantis, the legendary island that sank into the sea in a single day. At the pace that the climate is changing, the prophecy may be a reality sooner than you think.

Mauritius, on the other hand, is more multicultural with Hindus making up slightly more than half of its population of 1.1 million. Its ethnically diverse population also includes Africans, French and Chinese.

Unlike Maldives, this country is a single island surrounded by stunning coral reefs. Its sparkling lagoons, palm-fringed beaches and cobalt blue sea attract millions of tourists every year. The road system in Mauritius is more developed, connecting the capital city of Port Louis to other parts of the island. This makes travelling easier as you can just rent a car to explore the entire island.

Economic activities in Mauritius are more diverse, with sugar being its main export. But then, it has since diversified into other industries, particularly manufacturing of textiles and clothing. Its scenic beauty and lush forests make it an ideal tourist destination for those who favour activities like water sports, hiking, jungle trekking and other extreme sports like paragliding and windsurfing.

Each country is beautiful in its own way. If you love sandy white, palm fringed beaches, Mauritius is the place. But if you wish to wake up in the morning to the sound of the ocean breeze, then Maldives is the absolute choice. The water bungalows are amazing and you can't find that in Mauritius.

Yēmèn



A vast arid terrain caught my eyes as the plane made its descent into Sana'a International Airport. Harsh yet beautiful – this very much described the landscape of Sana'a, Yemen's capital city. Although rich in oil, it remains one of the poorest Arab nations where the majority of its people rely on farming as their main source of income.

Decades of civil war and continuing conflict made it difficult for the country to progress. I was fortunate to have visited the country before the conflict intensified in 2015, which led to the airport's closure. It remains closed to this day.

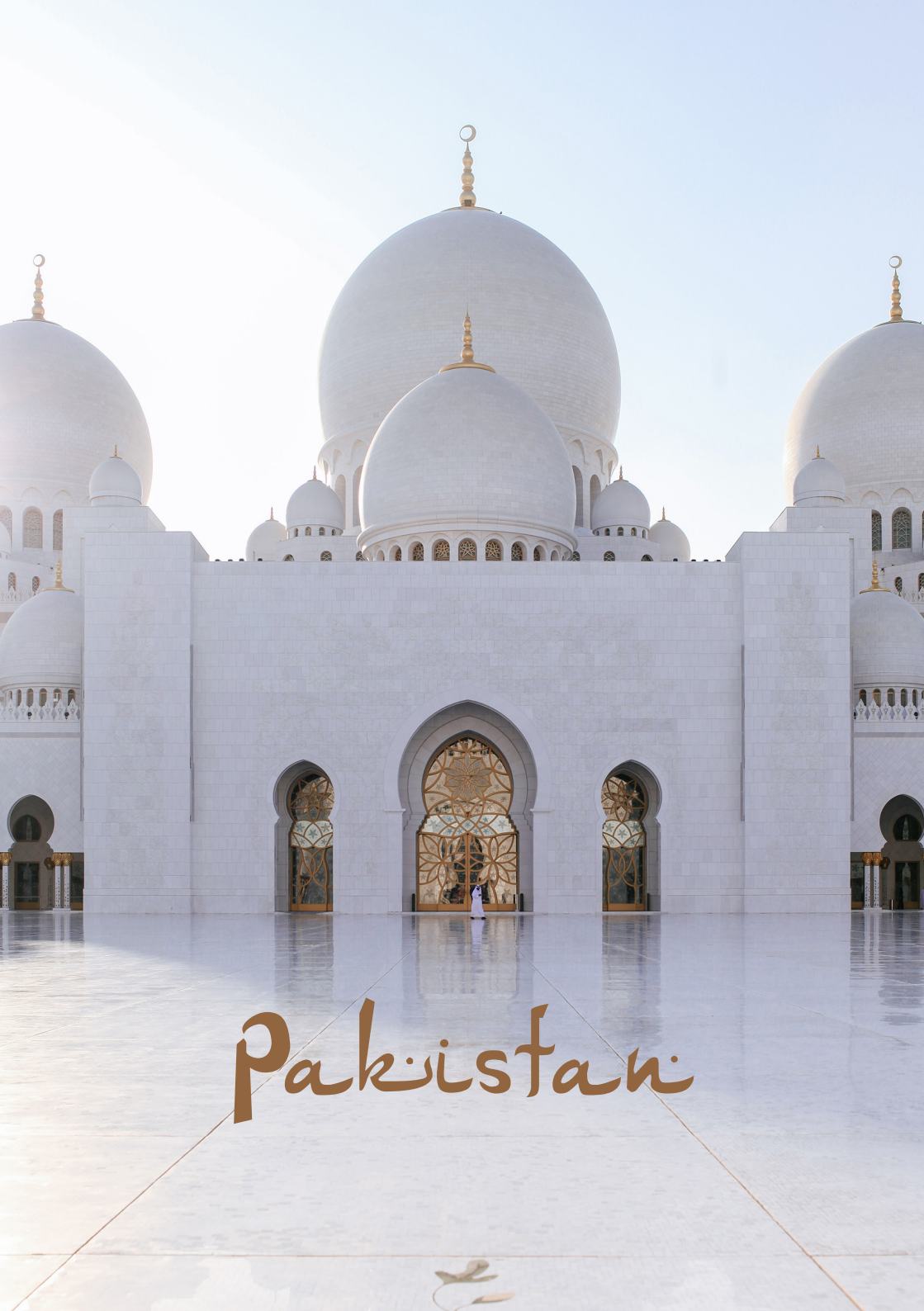
Sana'a has that old charm, with its building architecture dating back more than 2,000 years. Houses were mostly built from stone blocks and bricks where extended families live together. Many are two-storeys high, some even rise up to six storeys. It is interesting that these buildings have highly decorated windows and other features designed to beautify them.

I noticed that all the houses have flat roofs with clay as their finishing. It gives them that "unfinished look" but in certain homes, the rooftop has terraces which serve as a place for social gathering.

The country may be at war but at the time of my visit, Sana'a did not resemble a war zone. It was lively, with people going around doing their normal business. Travelling through city, I could not stop noticing men with bulging cheeks everywhere, at the restaurants, shops and marketplace. I was told that they were chewing *qat*, a type of flowering plant native to the Arabian peninsula.

It seemed that *qat* chewing is a social custom dating back thousands of years. I could only draw comparison with the chewing of betel leaves, mostly by elderly women in Malaysia. In Yemen, *qat* chewing is habitual among the men but women are not excluded although their numbers are not that high.

Qat leaves contain a stimulant that causes excitement and euphoria. Although *qat* chewing is not addictive as opium or other forms of drugs, the World Health Organisation (WHO) cautions that it can cause insomnia. This may affect work performance because the chewer normally turns up late for work which eventually affect work performance. This habit of chewing *qat* is slowly taking its toll on families because children as young as 11 years old are known to start chewing the leaves. This habit, if not stopped, will further deteriorate the already fragile economy. At the time of my visit, Yemen had made incredible effort to enhance the enrolment rate in schools, which stood at over 97%. But the conflict in 2015 has destroyed the country's education system with millions of children now unable to attend school. Many of these schools were either destroyed or closed down while some were used as shelters for the displaced or homeless. It is sad how civil war has torn the country apart, causing untold misery and sufferings to its people.



Pakistan

Yemen reminds me of Pakistan, another beautiful country that is facing an uncertain future due to its conflict with India. It was unnerving to arrive in a city where you have to face full security check not only at the airport but also, the hotel where you are staying. That was what happened when I attended a conference many years ago in Karachi, Pakistan.

The airport was heavily guarded by armed police personnel and everyone had to go through stringent security check. On the way to the hotel, I noticed that most of the cars on the road were heavily dented and in a state of disrepair. This must be a sign that vehicles in Pakistan are used mainly as people carriers and not as a symbol of pride. In Malaysia, the type of car one drives provides some indication of the social status of the driver. Over here, it is just a means of transport to get people from one place to another.

As I entered the hotel, I was surprised to see armed guards at the lobby. Initially, I thought there was an incident that warranted the police to search hotel guests but was told that it was normal procedure. My luggage was put through the security scanner to check for suspicious items. After being given the security clearance, I quickly checked into my room.

Things have not changed much since my last visit. In September 2019, I attended a conference in Lahore and the security check was as stringent as before. We had to go through full security check at the airport and at the hotel. The five-star hotel we were staying had high barbed wire fencing around the entire hotel parameter. It seems that all international hotels adopt such security measures to avoid possible harm by extremist factions whose targets are mostly foreign guests and visitors.

Pakistan is pretty backward in terms of development as it spends a large part of its national expenditure on defence. Allocation on education

is comparatively low, which is why almost half of its population does not have formal education. India's recent announcement to revoke the special status of Kashmir is most likely to escalate tension in Pakistan. The move by India is expected to further deteriorate relations between the two countries and it is most unlikely that lasting peace will prevail in the region.

AFRICA



The two African countries that I have been to are Ghana and Zimbabwe. They sit on the same continent, have the same climate and enjoy fairly high literacy rates but overall, Ghana outshines Zimbabwe in many aspects. With twice the population of Zimbabwe, Ghana's 29 million people enjoy a better standard of living compared to its neighbour of 14 million.

On the surface, it's difficult to see the difference between the two countries. Ghana is a sovereign state, having gained independence in 1957. Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia, was a self-governing British colony before the signing of a peace agreement in 1979 that resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Zimbabwe.

Interestingly, the literacy rates of Zimbabwe and Ghana are quite high at 86% and 76% respectively but ironically, 72% of Zimbabweans live below the poverty line compared to 24% in Ghana.

Ghana is famous for its gold and diamonds. In fact, it is Africa's second largest gold producer after South Africa. Most of the mining companies operating in the country are joint ventures with foreign interests.

There is nothing much to see in these African countries unless you are a nature lover. There are many tours to see the wildlife in both countries but Zimbabwe has the upper hand as it is blessed with the spectacular Victoria Falls, touted to be the largest fall in the world. Due to the sheer length of the fall, which is about a kilometre, the noise it creates can be heard from a distance of 40km. The waterfall is called *Mosi-o-Tunya* ("the smoke that thunders") by the local tribes. Located slightly over 700km from Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, the waterfall has been attracting tourists from all over the world who wish to see its spectacular beauty up close.

HUNGARY



Europe remains a favourite destination among tourists, particularly London and Paris. Hungary wasn't really on my wish list but an opportunity arose in April 2010, when I was invited to visit OUM's partner institution in Eger, Hungary.

After landing at Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport, I was whisked to Eger by car on a journey that took about two hours. Budapest is a beautiful city with amazing architecture. It is practically a living museum where buildings are a blend of 18th century baroque, Gothic as well as modern and contemporary architecture.

Eger has a history of wines, castles and thermal baths. Vineyards dotted the landscape and its residents were said to have been involved in wine production for over a thousand years. This enchanting town is best explored on foot as it is pretty small in size. The cobbled pavements of downtown Eger are reminiscent of many older villages and cities in Europe.

One of its landmarks is the Eszterházy Károly University of Applied Sciences (then known as Eszterházy Károly College), an institution which OUM has a collaboration with. Its impressive baroque style building, built over 200 years ago made it one of the imposing structures in Eger. Hungarian is the official language spoken by over 98% of its population. Conversing with the locals was a problem as English was hardly spoken here. Luckily there was an interpreter who helped eased my conversation with my hosts.

If you love architecture, this country is filled with ornate and beautiful buildings which you can explore. The capital city of Budapest is even acknowledged as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. Noted for its geothermal springs, the city houses the world's largest thermal water cave

system and attracts over four million tourists annually. If you are game for a fairyland adventure, this is the place to go.

SCOTLAND



This wasn't my first time in Edinburgh. I visited Scotland during my undergraduate studies and the experience wasn't that appealing.

All I could remember was the weather. The overcast sky and the cold air made the place so gloomy. I don't think I could last a week there without feeling depressed. Edinburgh wasn't anything like London, which is more vibrant and culturally diverse.

More recently, I had the opportunity to go to Edinburgh to attend the 9th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in September 2019. It was early autumn and thank God, the weather was bearable. Interestingly, the conference took place in a sports stadium, the Murrayfield Stadium, which is the largest in Scotland.

I particularly enjoyed the lecture by Lord David Puttnam, a British film producer, educator, environmentalist and member of the House of Lords. He spoke about the importance of digital literacy and re-skilling in preparing the workforce for 21st century jobs. Although a lot has been said about disruptive technology and automation, the question remains: how prepared are we?

For instance, some countries are already talking about transitioning to a low-carbon economy, which entails a shift from using fossil fuel as an energy source to renewable energy like sunlight, wind, water and geothermal heat. This is to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impact of climate change. The transition will give rise to the creation of low carbon jobs that require the current workforce to be reskilled to meet future demands.

He also threw the idea of the "fifth day", where a normal working week consists of four days of work, with the fifth day dedicated to study, training or re-training. It was a novel idea, but whether organisations would take up the idea is another matter.

In between the conference programme, I took time off to view the sights of this quaint city. Driving was out of the question as finding a parking bay within the city centre was almost impossible. Also, parking fees were expensive. Taking the Hop-On Hop-Off bus was a more sensible option. As the bus made its way into the city, the first thing I noticed was the Scott Monument, an imposing structure that looked like a cathedral but with a hollow column in the middle. It is the perfect spot for visitors to view the city from above. With a small entrance fee, one can climb the narrow spiral staircase that leads to the viewing platform. Although the bus stopped at designated spots for tourists to get down and see the city up close, I decided to stay on the bus for the entire journey. It was a relaxing way to savour the sights and sounds, without flexing a muscle. The route covered sights like the Edinburgh Castle, Scottish Parliament, Burns Monument and the Grassmarket. For those who are into the fabled Loch Ness monster story, head to the highlands for a view of the lake and stroll of the village. If you are in luck, you may even get to spot Nessie!

CANADA



I have been to many places and I found no other city that is more multicultural than Toronto. Just walk the streets and listen. You will notice people speaking in different languages – French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese and accents that I couldn't place. If you think Malaysia is culturally diverse, Canada is even more.

This is due to its relatively open immigration policy that contributed to its extremely diverse society. The ethnic mix gave the country its unique flavour and in 1971, Canada officially became a multicultural country.

What it means is that cultural values, languages and beliefs of Canada's diverse ethnic groups were fully recognised by the Government.

All the provinces have some form of multiculturalism policy to protect the heritage and dignity of its diverse population. Human rights are also an important part of Canadian law where everyone is treated equally. The law prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnic origin, skin colour, sexual orientation or family status. It sounds utopian but that does not mean that racial conflict does not exist.

The Québec City mosque shooting in 2017 is a glaring example. News of the shooting that killed six Muslim worshippers shook the nation and reminds us that racial harmony cannot be literally enforced by law alone. Communities living together must accept the different cultures and backgrounds of their neighbours in order create peace and harmony. This isolated incident did not discourage Canadians and the spirit of multiculturalism is very much alive in this country. I could feel the warmth of its people especially when walking into a grocery shop or café. They like making small talk which made me feel at ease.

The city, meanwhile, is a concrete maze with tall buildings soaring above the skyline. The most notable was the CN Tower, said to be one of the world's tallest, and can be viewed from all sides of the city. From public

sculptures and street art, the city neighbourhood is vibrant and offers tourists much to see. The Monument to Multiculturalism, located near Union Station, is itself a symbol of multiculturalism which very much defines the social fabric of the city.

ASEAN

I have been to most of the ASEAN cities and by comparison, countries within the region do not differ much in terms of climate, vegetation and to some extent, infrastructure development. Cities like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila bear similar resemblance with modern buildings and skyscrapers dominating the skyline while other cities are slowly catching up.



INDONESIA

Each country has its own distinctive features, both positive and not so positive. Jakarta, for instance, is known for its monstrous traffic jam or *macet* during much of the 5am to 8am and 5pm to 8pm rush hours, and for most of the days.

With the population of Greater Jakarta expected to increase to 40 million by 2040 from about 30 million today, the traffic problem is expected to worsen. There are plans to relocate the nation's capital to East Kalimantan in Borneo to overcome the traffic problem and at the same time, address the lopsided economic development and inequality of its population. Moving the capital will help spread the wealth away from the province of Java (where Jakarta is) to Kalimantan, which is four times bigger. It is expected to boost economic activities in the province which is home to 60% of Indonesia's 270 million population. Jakarta will continue to serve as the nation's commercial and financial centre while the new capital will be the country's administrative hub.

Other Indonesian cities like Bandung and Bali have their own attractions. Bandung has cooler year-round temperature compared to other cities and is a shopping haunt for those looking for reasonably-priced goods. Its factory outlets showcase many well-known brands and are often crowded during weekends.

Bali is the top choice among travellers looking for a peaceful retreat. Its stunning beaches, temples, gorgeous scenery and spectacular geological wonders will leave you awe-struck provided you are willing to explore beyond the crowded Kuta Beach.

THAILAND



Truth be told, Bangkok is famous for many things. For foodies, Thailand is a culinary haven. Visitors and tourists to Bangkok often make it a point to try Thai food as it is both healthy and tasty.

Thai food is mostly prepared traditionally, using spices, herbs and fresh ingredients which give it a distinct flavour.

The market for Thai food is also very competitive as most people eat out and many make a living out of selling food. Its floating markets remain a star attraction. People go there just to experience the local charm. It is interesting to watch how vendors sell a plethora of Thai products from their small rowing boats.

Thailand offers more than just scenery and natural beauty. Its service sector accounts to 40% of the labour force, which covers industries such as tourism, retail, health and transportation. As a tourist visiting Bangkok, I found the Thai people respectful of others. This makes a first-time tourist feel welcome. Be mindful that English is spoken mostly in the city and tourist areas but not so much in the outskirts. Even communicating with cab drivers can be a struggle at times.

In Thailand, unemployment is not a really a big issue. According to official data, it has the lowest rate of unemployment in the world at below 1%. Although jobs in the service and manufacturing industry are highly sought after, farming remains the lifeline of the majority of its people. About half of the population is into farming. Modern technology has enabled the country to move beyond self-sufficiency to become a major food exporter. On the other side of the equation, Bangkok is considered a fun city, with its nightlife entertainment and thriving cabaret scene. And of course, if you haven't noticed, massage parlours are everywhere!

SINGAPORE



I am saving the best for last. One country that is very close to home and close to my heart is Singapore. It is difficult to describe the feeling but the country is simply awesome. Many may think that I am biased but as an individual who has been to the island state a couple of times, it is difficult not to like this city.

To me, first impression counts. Changi Airport completely floored me. As the first touch point when travelling to Singapore, I can understand why Changi is consistently voted the world's best airport. It is simply out of this world. The airport caters to your every need – an outdoor nature trail, swimming pool, movie theatre, hawker-style food stalls, beauty and reflexology centres, children's play areas, sleeping areas and massage chairs all over the place. Not to mention, free WiFi and Internet connection.

To me, Changi is a destination itself. The welcoming ambience, the open spaces, the aesthetic appeal and, the luxurious feeling that you get when walking through the terminal – it is all very charming. Adventure awaits the moment you enter the terminal. Nature lovers get to marvel at the indoor gardens of sunflowers, orchids and cacti.

In Changi, you will never get bored. There are plenty of facilities to enjoy while waiting to catch a flight. For movie buffs, head to the theatre to watch new movie releases for free. Pop in at any time as they are open 24 hours a day. There is also a gaming zone where gamers get to play free Xbox and PlayStation games.

The latest attraction in Changi is the Jewel, a 10-storey development in front of Terminal 1 which opened in mid-2019. A key feature is the Canopy Park which is the size of 11 Olympic-sized swimming pools, sitting on the top floor of the dome-shaped structure. It offers not only shopping

and dining experience but other fun-filled activities. Most of the things here are mentioned in superlatives. Jewel has the world's tallest indoor waterfall, the Rain Vortex which stands at 40m high. Its Canopy Mazes has the largest number of mazes in the world, 600 in total. Discovery Slides is the first large-scale slides designed as a sculptural art piece that provide hours of sliding fun for visitors.

In most of the airports that I have been to, waiting for security clearance at the immigration and customs checkpoints could be frustrating at times. I found the process at Changi more efficient and honestly, I wouldn't mind if it took a bit longer. That's how much I felt about Changi.

Singapore is almost a perfect place to live in – without much of the problems that big cities face like traffic congestion, littering and pollution. Trees are everywhere, particularly along the freeway and city streets but nothing beats the Supertrees found at Gardens by the Bay. The Government makes great effort to make the country eco-friendly by creating green sanctuaries to minimise the global impact of climate change.

Many Malaysians also work in Singapore as the strong Singapore dollar and low taxes make it worth the effort. Singapore exemplifies the success of a small country that takes advantage of what little natural resources it has and turn it into a world-class economy. Following its independence more than 50 years ago, Singapore was forced to innovate in order to develop the country.

With limited water resources, it recycles waste water into ultra clean, high grade reclaimed water, which we now know as NEWater. It also desalinates sea water into drinking water, contributing 25% to total water consumption while NEWater makes up for another 40%. Such innovations

allow the country to progress without being heavily dependent on external resources.

Semakau Landfill is another innovative development. It serves as an ecological offshore dumpsite where waste is processed in such a way that the island doubles as a wildlife and tourist attraction. Jurong Rock Caverns is an underground cavern that stores liquid hydrocarbon like crude oil and gas oil. It provides storage needs for oil and gas companies operating on the island.

One thing is certain. Education is very well emphasised in the island state. It is the one crucial element that defines its success. Described as world leading, its education system has been crafted to meet the varying skills of students, from pre-school to university. Its school-based gifted programme, for instance, identifies the top 1% of the student population where they are offered special enrichment programmes to harness their full potential. Also, the country believes in fair compensation to its workforce so that they give their best.

The common question that begs answers is how does a small country succeed in a big world? In his paper “Public Administration and Policy: An Asia Pacific Journal” published in July 2018, Jon S.T. Quah unveils the secrets. He summed them up as pragmatic leadership, effective public bureaucracy, sustaining a clean government devoid of corruption, nurturing the best and brightest talents, and learning from other countries.

But it all boils down to one crucial point: having leaders who walk the talk. The country prides itself as having a competent public service, a clean government where corruption is dealt with seriously, an education system that nurtures the best and brightest. It continuously looks abroad

to learn from the best practices of others and avoiding the common mistakes.

Every nation can take a leaf out of Singapore's book of success but it is only achievable when there is effective, pragmatic and honest leadership. As I bade goodbye to Singapore on my recent trip, this little nation has without a doubt left an indelible impression on me. Worry not, I will be back!

APPRECIATE AND LEARN

Traveling can be pleasurable but at times, it can also be frustrating. Many things can go wrong – flight delay, lost baggage or most often, delays at immigration check point. Such encounters can be such a drag that they can overshadow all the positive aspects of the trip. But these are the little things that make my travel memorable. I encountered missing bags while on a trip to Indonesia and France. The trip to Bandung at the time included OUM Chancellor YABhg Tun Jeanne Abdullah and my former boss, Tan Sri Anuwar. With only the shirt on my back, I had to borrow a batik shirt and a pair of socks from a colleague, Prof Ramli Bahroom, while waiting to have my luggage re-routed. To cut the story short, Prof Ramli decided to let me have his batik shirt for good which I wear often. I even wore it during the university's farewell lunch for Prof Ramli who retired recently.

The other incident wasn't too bad as it happened during my trip back from France. It taught me a valuable lesson – stick to hand-carry for short stays. For long stays, bring along an extra change of clothes in your hand-carry just in case the checked-in bag goes missing.

While in Germany, a heart-stopping event occurred when the plane encountered technical problems 10 minutes after we were airborne. It was circling for two hours in the air when the pilot decided to turn back and land in Frankfurt. It was nerve-wrecking as we did not know what to expect. I had to continue my journey on another plane.

Delayed flight also caused me to cancel a meeting with 200 teachers in Bintulu. Flying is supposed to take you to your destination faster but there will be times when you have to deal with uncertainties like bad weather, engine failure or technical problems.

Travelling also has its ups and downs especially when it is your first trip to a foreign land. For instance, several incidences in India had made me wiser and more cautious. It is better that you made arrangements with the hotel and transport prior to your arrival to avoid unnecessary hassle.

A destination that is only a few kilometres can take hours if you get into the “wrong” taxi. Cab drivers may take you for a ride and charge exorbitant fare particularly if you are unfamiliar with the place. But then, this can happen anywhere.

A park excursion in Delhi, for instance, ended up with me having to “pay” for something that should have cost nothing. A seemingly nice gentleman came up to me while I was relaxing on the bench and said, “Sir, we are deeply honoured that you have come to this park to admire the place. How about signing this book as a record of you being here?” Grinning, I gladly signed the book. The shock came shortly after when the gentleman

asked me to pay a few hundred rupees for penning down my name. There are many ways people can extricate money from you. I guess this was the nice way. If he was peddling souvenirs, I would have certainly turned away!

While visiting my daughter in Moscow, I accidentally left the key inside her apartment on my way out. I panicked but my daughter told me not to worry. She pried open the door using a credit card. Never underestimate the value of credit cards. Well, I may be an engineer but I am not MacGyver!

Internet and WiFi connections are among the things that really concern me while on an overseas trip. It is the most convenient way to touch base with family members and colleagues. Most countries have really good connection but in this particularly country, to get WiFi connection, you need to text the establishment for the password. In one particular incident, the password only arrived while I was about to board the plane on my way home. So much for technology.

These are some of the setbacks of travelling. Learn to let go and accept them as part of the whole experience. It also taught me to appreciate the little blessings in my life. There is a lot to be thankful for when others have much less. Travelling allows me to experience new and interesting things, try different food and meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

In some countries, ordering more food than you can eat can put a dent in your pocket. Restaurants in Germany fine customers for not finishing their meals as a way to avoid food wastage. Some restaurants in Switzerland also do the same. Food wastage is common in many countries and to think that people in Africa are starving, it is such a shame.

I think a lot can be improved if we take the time to learn from others who are more successful. Good education changes people for the better while innovation makes people relevant in a changing world. I strongly believe that values make a person a success, not money. The values of hard work and integrity, for example, make Japan a highly successful nation. These traits are common in most successful people everywhere, no matter where they are from. Honesty and sincerity, never giving up, patience and being respectful of others but at the same time, humble and down-to-earth, these are cherished values that make them stand out from the crowd. They are evident in every culture, all you need to do is learn, observe and practice.

